

Breakthrough Series  
Collaborative: Reducing  
Disproportionality and Disparate  
Outcomes for Children and  
Families of Color in the Child  
Welfare System  
**Framework for Change**

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## **Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System**

### **The Framework for Change**

*"... there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers."*

*Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 5*

#### **Preface**

The statistics paint a disturbing picture. At every point along the child welfare continuum, children and families of color are represented in numbers that far exceed their relative proportion of the population. Rates of substantiated maltreatment, entry into out-of-home care, and length of stay are all higher for children of color than for their white counterparts; while family reunification and exit rates are lower.

Yet this comparison belies the fact that outcomes for white children and families in the child welfare system are also less than desirable. The hope in this BSC is that by improving the system for children and families of color – those who are most disadvantaged by the current system – the system will ultimately be improved for all children and families.

This phenomenon is not a secret, nor is it confined to child welfare. Disparate outcomes and disproportionate representation of children and families of color are also an issue in juvenile justice, education, health care, and other systems. It is an uncomfortable and emotion laden issue but child welfare leaders cannot continue to "sleepwalk" around it for it is an endangerment to children and families.

Concerned child welfare administrators, scholars, researchers and workers have puzzled over the problem for more than 30 years. Yet because it stems from a complex network of social and political disadvantages at the individual and institutional level, many leaders assume it is simply the norm and believe that there is little they can do to change it. In the meantime, disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color in the child welfare system continue to increase.

We can no longer afford to step softly around this problem; we must be willing to wake up and awaken others to confront institutional and individual issues that perpetuate disproportionality. Child welfare leaders in several jurisdictions around the country have stepped up to the challenge and initiated strategies targeting institutional and practice biases that impact outcomes for children of color and their families; they are beginning to see promising results. It will require bold action and innovative leadership to make a lasting difference.

This Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) will leverage the wisdom, experience and knowledge of national experts to create a practice framework. This framework will be used by public child welfare teams representing states, counties and tribes to test ideas addressing disproportionality and disparate outcomes through the development of small scale strategies and interventions that can be implemented, tested and measured in rapid cycles. Successful strategies will be spread as teams test strategies that can help reverse the trend.

Our vision for this Breakthrough Series Collaborative is that participating jurisdictions will contribute to the development of child welfare systems that are free of structural racism and benefit all children, families and communities by:

- Engaging with a group of other jurisdictions in critical change activities,
- Creating environments in which strategies can be developed and tested,
- Developing a cadre of leaders across the country who are working toward solutions,
- Creating and sustaining partnerships to advance the work, and
- Disseminating lessons learned.

## Background and Overview

Child welfare systems cannot be improved without addressing disproportionality and disparate outcomes. Disproportionality refers both to the presence of children of color in the child welfare system in percentages that dramatically exceed their presence in the general population as well as poor outcomes for these children. Consider the following facts:

- In 2000, 64 percent of the children in foster care were children of color although they comprised only 36 percent of the U.S. child population under 18 years of age.<sup>1</sup> During this same year African American children accounted for approximately 38 percent of the total number of children placed in foster care while comprising only 15 percent of the total U.S. child population under 18 years of age.
- American Indian children represented 3 percent of children in out-of-home care while comprising 1 percent of the child population.<sup>2</sup> In states where there are large numbers of American Indian children they may represent between 15 to 65 percent of children in the child welfare system. These percentage rates may be underestimates, as they do not include the number of children in tribal child welfare systems.
- Data that are aggregated on a national level often mask the overrepresentation of Hispanic/Latino children who have been found to be over-represented in foster care in states and cities with large Hispanic populations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2002). The AFCARS Report. Retrieved September 25, 2002 from: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report7.html>: The Annie E. Casey and The Population Reference Bureau (2001). The Child Population: First Data from the 2000 Census. Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families. AFCARS, Report #8. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003. The report is available online at <http://www.act.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/report8.html>

<sup>3</sup> 2000 AFCARS and Census Data, analysis by Dr. Robert Hill

**What causes disproportionality?** Disproportionality of children of color is the result of multiple disadvantages that are social, political, economic and attitudinal in nature. Specific factors leading to disproportionality in the child welfare system include poverty, classism, racism, organizational culture, service strategy and resources. Of these factors, poverty is often singled out as a major contributor, since foster children of color come primarily from families living in poverty. However, no significant racial differences in the incidence of maltreatment were found in the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) for NIS-2 or NIS-3<sup>4</sup> suggesting that race influences the institutional response to maltreatment resulting in higher substantiation and placement rates for children of color.

These factors shape organizational structures and practice in a way that limits positive outcomes. Disproportional entry into care, long stays and poor results have a negative impact on children's well being and influence their physical and mental health, academic achievement, spirituality, cultural connections and connectedness to family and community. Removal of children from their families and communities also leaves the family members feeling vulnerable, disenfranchised, disempowered and unable to act on the behalf of themselves or their children.

**Promising Practices** The challenge of disproportionality and disparate outcomes requires agencies to be assertive in assessing their own policies, programs, practices, and beliefs and to work actively to modify and develop innovative responses that improve the experience and results for children and families of color. Many jurisdictions across the country such as Ramsey County, Minnesota; King County, Washington; and Fulton County, Georgia have begun work that targets disproportionality. Many of their efforts are showing promising early results.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. DHHS, Administration for children and Families (1980-1996). National Incidence Study I, II, & III, Washington, DC.

## THE FRAMEWORK

This document offers a framework that describes the key components that child welfare systems must address to reduce and ultimately eliminate these disparities. This framework is not prescriptive but instead identifies eight principles to guide action and seven key component areas that if addressed in policy, programming, practice and training are likely to lead to positive outcomes.

### Key Principles

The public child welfare system is responsible for assuring safety, permanence and well being for all children served. In order to meet this obligation for children and families at risk of experiencing disproportionality and disparate outcomes, there are eight basic principles that must guide all policies, programs, practices, services and supports. The order of the principles listed here does not suggest any priority; each principle is critical and should be reflected in all aspects of public/tribal child welfare agency (the agency) operations.

1. The goal of the agency is to secure safety, permanency and maximum developmental outcomes for each child served irrespective of race, ethnicity, tribal status, class, location, or family structure so that these attributes are not predictors of negative outcomes.
2. The agency understands and respects the varying beliefs, values, and family practices of different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. Culturally relevant services and supports are family-centered, family-driven, and strengths-based. These services comprise the least intrusive intervention possible and are need-driven; they should be available in the communities, neighborhoods, and tribal communities where families live.
3. Parents, children, youth, kin, communities and tribes have strengths, resiliency, and their own natural supports, which are used in reducing risk factors. The public agency recognizes and honors the fact that children are inextricably connected to their families and communities (cultural and geographic).
4. Improved outcomes for children and families of color are advanced by the open discussion of personal, organizational and institutional racism and the development of strategies to remedy its impact on families and children.
5. Continuous assessment of policies and practices is necessary to assure that they do not further disadvantage children and families who experience social and economic vulnerability and physical and mental disabilities.
6. Advocacy is required for a better alignment of resources, policies and practices with the needs of families to assure access to prevention, early intervention, diversion and permanency/reunification services.
7. Shared leadership and collaborative efforts among courts, schools and other agencies are necessary to improve the way in which the needs of children and families are met.
8. Partnerships with the diverse communities and tribes are essential to reduce potential risks to children.

## Key Components

The eight key principles described above can be translated into practice through seven component areas of a child welfare agency's work. The work in each component should reflect the core values defined by the key principles. In order to eliminate disproportionality and disparities in outcomes child welfare agencies should address all seven of these components. Improvements in the overall system of working with and supporting children and families who are involved with the child welfare system will only occur when improvements in each of these seven individual components are achieved.

1. Design agency mission, vision, values, policies and protocols that support anti-racist practice.
  - a. Agency leadership is developed and supported to actively and affirmatively ensure that policies, practices, programs and services are supportive of children and families of color through an articulated agency vision.
  - b. Agency leadership identifies, continually assesses and changes policies and practices that contribute to and support structural racism and impacts poor outcomes for families of color in the child welfare system.
  - c. Organizational structure and funding allocations support culturally relevant strategies at each critical decision point across the continuum of families' involvement in the child welfare system, including addressing the structural racism that leads to the over-use of placement.
  - d. Agency leadership creates an environment that promotes ongoing discussions of race and disproportionality and addresses these issues in an authentic manner that assists staff and stakeholders to integrate anti-racist principles into their work.
  - e. Staffing composition reflects the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious/spiritual backgrounds of the population being served.
  - f. Consumers inform decisions regarding policy and procedures and are represented on decision-making bodies such as advisory boards, consultant teams and volunteer committees.
  - g. Agency leadership provides staff with appropriate and adequate support to partner with parents, children, youth, communities and tribes.
2. Develop cross-system leadership to address issues related to disproportionality and disparity in outcomes for children and families of color in the child welfare system.
  - a. Agency leaders assume responsibility for educating their colleagues in other child serving agencies on issues related to structural and institutional racism.
  - b. A multi-agency team comprised of leaders in the child welfare agency, court, CASA, school, media, policy making agencies, families, community leaders and youth is used to identify and address cross-system issues about the well-being of families and children of color who are in or come to the attention of the child welfare system.

- c. Policies and procedures in the agency reflect an understanding of issues related to structural and institutional racism within the child welfare agency and with key stakeholders representing family and child serving agencies (court, schools, health care, mental health).
- 3. Collaborate with key stakeholders to support families in the context of their communities and tribes so as to safely divert them away from the child welfare system, whenever possible.
  - a. Deliberate efforts are made to safely divert families away from the child welfare system and into community and tribal based supports that include home based services whenever possible.
  - b. The family's informal networks of support are actively identified and engaged to care for and protect children in their communities.
  - c. Culturally relevant services, supports and opportunities are need-driven, individualized and made available and accessible in the community and tribe including access to partner agencies who offer housing, substance abuse, subsistence benefits, education, employment, transportation and physical/mental healthcare.
  - d. Funding for culturally competent front-end and post-permanency services assumes priority.
- 4. Agency partners with the community about child maltreatment, disproportionality, racism and culture to focus on how communities can develop strategies to build the protective capacity of neighborhoods, tribes, and families.
  - a. The agency identifies, engages and raises awareness of the issue of disproportionality and disparity of outcomes with community service providers, partners, leaders and emerging leaders.
  - b. The agency uses proactive strategies to build public will and to develop community-based alternatives to the child welfare system that include upfront collaboration with mandatory reporters, community leaders, hotline workers and the media.
  - c. The agency acts as a catalyst to improve the capacity of communities and tribes to prevent child abuse and neglect.
  - d. Mandatory reporters are educated regarding cultural and racial differences in child rearing and how this is related to child maltreatment laws and their reporting responsibilities.
  - e. Agency services and workers are co-located in communities where families live.
- 5. Train and educate the agency staff and stakeholders about institutional and structural racism and its impact on decision-making, policy and practice.
  - a. The agency develops a process that creates a common language, analysis and understanding of racism - individual, structural and institutional.
  - b. Staff understand their own racial and cultural identities and the impact of assimilation and internalized racial oppression on their work with families.

- c. Staff understand and their practice reflects the need for continued family connections and the impact of placing children and young people in situations where their language and cultural heritage is not understood.
  - d. Staff receive ongoing support, training and preparation for working with parents, children, youth, communities and tribes using child welfare core competencies including culturally appropriate interviewing, the use of genograms, ecomaps, family group decision making and other culturally respectful and inclusive planning and decision making tools and practices.
  - e. Ongoing case consultation is available to staff on cross-racial and cross-cultural issues.
  - f. The agency performance appraisal process includes an assessment of staff's ability to work with families of different cultural backgrounds.
  - g. The agency assures that contract providers demonstrate culturally competent practice.
6. Use cultural values, beliefs and practices of families, communities and tribes to shape family assessment, case planning, case service design and the case decision making process.
- a. Parents, youth, children, kin<sup>i</sup>, tribes and others who are significant in the life of the child and family are engaged as partners who shape case planning and decision-making in ways that build upon cultural strengths and acknowledge the impact of structural racism<sup>ii</sup> on family outcomes at all decision points, including but not limited to:
    - Intake/initial screening
    - Assessment
    - Service planning and delivery
    - Placement
    - Reunification and other permanency options
    - Case closure
    - Post permanency supports
  - b. Family team building processes include building the capacity of parents/kin and youth to participate in every decision related to their situation and to advocate on their own behalf to sustain the safety and well-being of their children and families.
  - c. Staff fully share information with the family about:
    - the agency's assessment of child safety and family capacity;
    - the availability of agency and community-based supports and services;
    - the agency's commitment to continuity in family, community and tribal relationships; and
    - the consequences of the agency's intervention
  - d. Staff fully share information about the rights, responsibilities and expectations of parents, children, youth, the agency and the court.
  - e. Placement and reunification strategies work to maintain, honor and support relationships and connections between parents, siblings, children, kin and



significant others. The agency gives priority to kinship placements when placement is necessary.

- f. At every decision point in the child welfare service continuum culturally appropriate assessments, decision-making practices and anti-racist tools are used to capitalize on the strengths and needs of parents, children, youth and families.
7. Develop and use data in partnership with families, communities, universities, staff, courts and other stakeholders to assess agency success at key decision points in addressing disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system.
- a. Development of measurement strategies, definition of data elements and the collection and interpretation of data encompasses a participatory approach that includes parents, youth and children.
  - b. Staff recognize and address the lack of trust by communities of color and tribes often related to the use of data due to the misuse, misrepresentation and misinterpretation of data.
  - c. Data on process and outcomes are categorized by ethnicity/race, are tracked at key decision points, used to improve agency and staff performance and are reviewed regularly and consistently at all levels of the agency.
  - d. Data are shared with the community to facilitate partnerships to address disproportionality.
  - e. Data are used to evaluate the effectiveness of contract services required to meet the needs of families in a culturally competent manner.
  - f. Data regarding customer satisfaction are obtained and used to assess agency performance.

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<sup>i</sup> Kin is defined by the family and may include a range of individuals such as the maternal and paternal relatives, adult siblings and community defined traditions such as God parents, tribal networks and individuals not biologically or legally related.

<sup>ii</sup> Structural Racism is the complex ways in which historical oppression, culture, ideology, political economy, public policy and institutional practices interact to produce forms of racial sorting that reproduce and reinforce a hierarchy of color that privileges whiteness and marginalizes blackness (The Aspen Institute. Retrieved online at <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/Programt3.asp?/=83&bid=1246>)